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ABSTRACT

This document explains how to establish study circles for public dialogue and community problem solving with the aim of building strong neighborhoods. The foreword explains the value of study circles in addressing the challenges currently facing all kinds of neighborhoods and presents 10 specific guidelines for organizing study circles in a neighborhood. The next section consists of broad guidelines, discussion questions, and tips to help facilitators conduct four discussion sessions. Session 1 gives participants a chance to talk about their connections to the neighborhood and hear others' experiences. Session 2 offers a menu of issues for community study circles to address. The issues raised include building a stronger feeling of community, making one's neighborhood a better place for young people, improving neighborhood safety, building a more livable neighborhood, creating good jobs for the neighborhood, and working with schools to improve education and the neighborhood. Session 3 examines building a stronger, more effective neighborhood by solving problems, planning for the future, and building a sense of community. Session 4 examines strategies for moving from words to actions. Forty action ideas are presented. Concluding the document are guidelines for serving in the roles of study circle facilitator and recorder. (MN)

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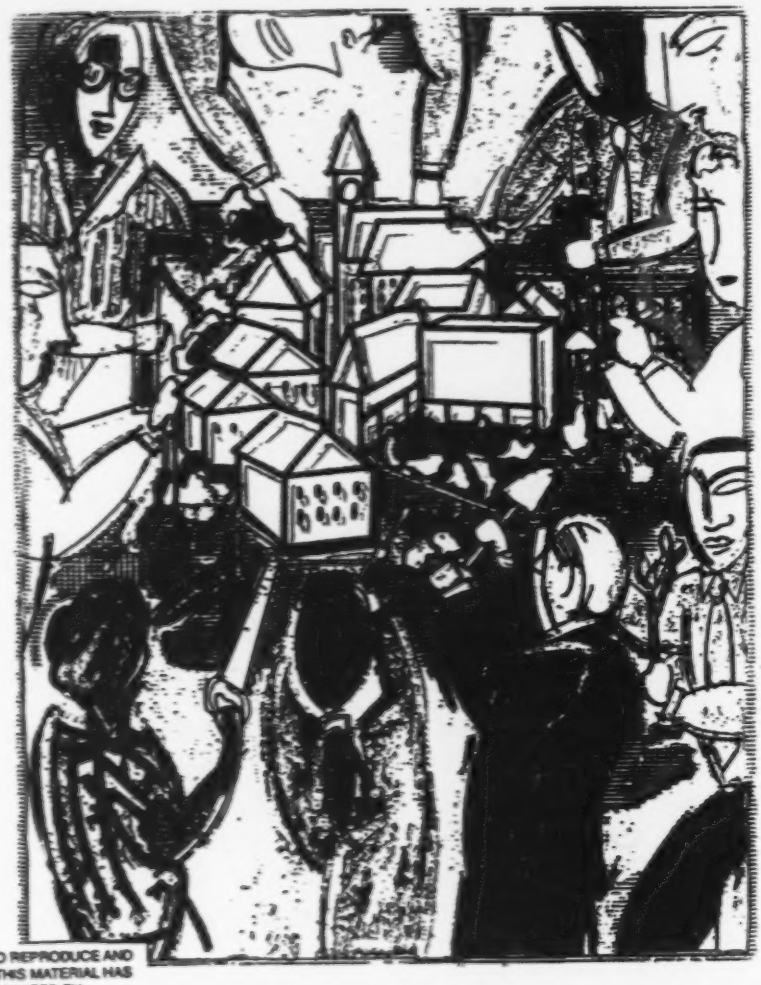

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Building Strong Neighborhoods

A Study Circle Guide for Public Dialogue and Community Problem Solving

Study Circles Resource Center,
a project of the Topsfield Foundation, Inc.

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Building Strong Neighborhoods was developed by the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC). SCRC is a project of the Topsfield Foundation, Inc. (TFI), a private, nonprofit, nonpartisan foundation that is dedicated to advancing deliberative democracy and improving the quality of public life in the United States. SCRC carries out this mission by helping communities organize **study circles – small-group, democratic, highly participatory discussions** that give everyday people opportunities to make a difference in their communities.

Study circle organizers bring large numbers of people into these small-group discussions on the same issue at the same time. **These study circle programs lead to a wide range of action efforts.**

We would like to help you organize study circles throughout your neighborhood. **SCRC offers assistance, free of charge, to organizers of large-scale study circle programs.** SCRC can provide more detailed advice on organizing and facilitating study circles, more copies of this guide, or copies of study circle guides on other issues (including race, crime and violence, education, immigration, diversity, and youth issues). Please contact us: SCRC, P.O. Box 203, Pomfret, CT 06258. Phone: (860) 928-2616. Fax: (860) 928-3713. E-mail: scrc@neca.com.

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Foreword

Neighborhoods have changed in many ways over the years, but one basic fact remains the same: strong neighborhoods are places where we feel at home.

Strong neighborhoods can be in cities, suburbs, or rural areas. Some strong neighborhoods are quiet and peaceful; others are lively centers where businesses thrive. They are places where young people are cared for, not just by their parents but by everyone. Strong neighborhoods connect us with others, and surround us with people we can count on.

Today, we are facing some difficult challenges. All kinds of neighborhoods are dealing with crime, economic problems, tensions between different groups of people, drug and alcohol abuse, and other things. To make matters worse, many of us barely know our neighbors.

The good news is that the people living in our neighborhoods have a great deal of energy, talent, and creativity. Parents. Retirees. Young people. Business people. Neighborhood leaders. Police officers. Social workers. Bus drivers. Ministers, rabbis, and other clergy members. Teachers. Grandparents. Public officials. Each person has unique skills, ideas, vision, and commitment that can help build stronger, better neighborhoods for all of us.

Unfortunately, many neighborhoods aren't able to take full advantage of the energy and commitment of their residents. Most of the people who live and work in our neighborhoods are not at the table when problems are being discussed and decisions are being made. It is often the same leaders who try to represent all of the people in the neighborhood, and sometimes those leaders "burn out."

A growing number of local organizers around the country are using study circles to bring lots of people to the table. Study circles are small-group, democratic discussions, with plenty of give-and-take. A neutral facilitator helps participants consider all sides of a neighborhood issue, listen and share views, and look for new solutions.

▼ Getting new people involved

Study circle organizers have been able to involve large numbers of people by reaching out to many different organizations and parts of the community. By working with congregations, schools, businesses, unions, and neighborhood associations, they make sure that citizens from all parts of the community are involved.

People find study circles valuable because:

- the discussions begin with people talking about their own experiences.
- the small groups help people of different backgrounds talk about difficult issues in a safe, respectful way.
- with many small groups meeting at the same time, people know that they are part of a larger effort.
- the study circle program as a whole helps people solve problems and take action in their neighborhoods and communities.

Once study circle programs get started, they usually grow larger and stronger – people take hold of this rare chance to understand each other and work together. Study circle participants often talk about how quickly the time passed, since the discussion was focused, honest, and productive. They also talk about how much fun they had getting to know each other.

▽ Moving from talk to action

Traditionally, neighborhood organizers see a particular problem, come up with a solution, and then ask people to help them. Study circle organizers get everyday people involved from the very beginning; they help more people get involved in figuring out the solutions that will work best for them, and then they encourage the different efforts that result. These programs move from talk to action because they:

- build understanding between people of different backgrounds and opinions.
- give people the chance to look at a range of views and approaches, and come up with their own creative ideas.
- build relationships between people and organizations who can work together.
- create more productive ways for citizens to work with public employees, such as police officers, teachers, elected officials, and social workers.
- help people gain a sense of "ownership" of the issues, which increases their determination to find solutions and carry them out.

To make and sustain progress in our neighborhoods, we all need to get involved. Study circles provide a way to do that. Through dialogue and action, we **can** make our neighborhoods stronger.

Since 1993, many cities and towns have organized large-scale study circle programs on issues such as race relations, crime and violence, education, criminal justice, immigration, and youth issues. Some examples of concrete results from these programs are:

- ▶ youth mentoring programs;
- ▶ film festivals on ethnic diversity;
- ▶ school-business partnerships;
- ▶ a multiracial "unity choir";
- ▶ improvements to community policing programs;
- ▶ new playgrounds;
- ▶ new hiring policies;
- ▶ a new supermarket;
- ▶ citywide diversity celebrations;
- ▶ a city violence prevention center; and
- ▶ a new state law reforming the corrections system in Oklahoma.

▽ Using this guide

This guide is not meant just for reading; it's meant for you to **use.** Here's the basic outline of the discussion sessions in this guide:

Session 1 gives you a chance to talk about your connections to the neighborhood and hear about others' experience.

Sessions 2a-2f offer a menu of issues. Choose the session or sessions that fit your neighborhood.

Session 3 is an opportunity for you to talk about long-term ways of making your neighborhood stronger.

Session 4 helps you talk about what you want to do next. This session is also supplemented by a **List of action ideas,** which includes a number of inspiring and creative steps that ordinary people have taken to improve their communities.

Building Strong Neighborhoods is designed to be a flexible tool for study circle organizers. As you put it to work in your neighborhood, please keep in touch with us. The staff of the Study Circles Resource Center can assist you with your program and put you in touch with others who are organizing similar programs. We also want to learn from you so we can tell the story of neighborhoods like yours, where citizens are working together to solve problems and strengthen their community. ▷

How to organize study circles in your neighborhood

If you want to get more people involved in efforts to improve your neighborhood, this guide can help you. By organizing study circles throughout your neighborhood, you can give residents an important chance to share their concerns and ideas, form new friendships, and take action to solve problems.

There are several important things to remember. First, share the burden: distribute the work among people in the neighborhood. Second, make it clear that all different viewpoints and backgrounds will be respected in the study circles. Third, make sure that people understand that this project will help people solve problems in the neighborhood, not just talk about them.

▼ Call SCRC for more detailed advice on the following steps:

1 ***Get a few friends to help you.*** Single out a few people you know well, have worked with before, and who would be excited about this project.

2 ***Hold a pilot study circle.*** Think (together) of ten or twelve people who could help move this project forward. Give them a personal invitation to a pilot study circle, and try out one or two of the sessions. (Find someone who can serve as a neutral facilitator for that meeting – see the inside back cover.) At the end, ask them what they think of the process, and how to make it work in your neighborhood.

Starting small is O.K. – in fact, we recommend it!

In a study circle project, the more participants you have, the better. A good target for your first round of study circles might be 50 people, or 1% of the population if your neighborhood has more than 5,000 residents.

However, don't be afraid to start small. A single pilot study circle (see step 2) is relatively easy to organize, and it can help you launch a much larger effort.

3 ***Make a list of groups and organizations in your neighborhood.*** To involve a large number of people, you need to tap into as many groups and organizations as you can. Make a list of all the schools, congregations, businesses, clubs, nonprofits, libraries, tenants' associations, scout troops, and other groups in the neighborhood. Also list key outsiders who work closely with the neighborhood, including police officers, public officials, and other government employees.

4 ***Hold another pilot study circle, with representatives from different organizations.*** Invite people from some of these organizations to another pilot circle. (Personal invitations work best.) If you have more than twelve people, hold more than one circle. Try for a good mix of people in each circle.

5 ***Form a study circle working group.*** Ask all the people who've been involved so far to join the working group. Make sure this group represents the different kinds of people living in the neighborhood. Split the working group into twos and threes to start on the following tasks:

a ***Plan the kickoff.*** This is a large meeting that takes place just before the study circles begin, to announce the project to the whole neighborhood. Invite one or two speakers who can describe the study circles and inspire people to take part. Provide refreshments, and leave some time for people to socialize and sign up.

"Selling" the study circle idea

- Think of a catchy name for your project. Some good titles of study circle programs: Lee County Pulling Together; Community Conversations; the Decatur Roundtables.
- When describing your project, tell people some of the issues they'll get to talk about: "Come to our neighborhood roundtables, where we'll be dealing with issues like crime, race, jobs, and the schools."
- Be clear about the time commitment you are asking people to make.

b ***Recruit and train facilitators.*** If you can, find some people who are skilled at facilitating groups. Also, invite people who have the personality to be good facilitators – good listeners often make good facilitators. Give them information about study circle facilitation, and bring them together for a training. Make sure people understand the main rule: facilitators are neutral, and must keep their opinions to themselves.

c ***Find sites and handle other details.*** Arrange for study circles to meet in schools, libraries, police substations, churches, firehouses, and businesses; in a pinch, use people's homes. If you can, provide child care, transportation, or other services that will help people take part. If possible, find volunteers to serve as recorders for the groups.

d ***Recruit people to join the study circles.*** Again, personal invitations work best. Get everyone on the working group to recruit people from their organization or circle of friends. Go door-to-door. Create flyers and signup sheets to pass out in the neighborhood. Get your information into local newsletters, church bulletins, and newspapers, and think of other ways to get the word out.

e ***Plan the action forum.*** This large meeting takes place at the end of a round of study circles. Beforehand, use the records from each group to identify the main areas of concern. At the forum, allow enough time for someone from each study circle to give a quick summary of its ideas (no more than five minutes each). Encourage people to sign up for action groups on the main areas of concern. Give the action groups some time to get acquainted and begin planning. Close the meeting with a speaker who will congratulate everyone on their efforts. Make sure there is food, and time for socializing.

6 ***Hold the kickoff meeting.*** Try to get the local newspaper to cover the kickoff.

– STUDY CIRCLES BEGIN –

7 ***Support the study circles.*** Bring the facilitators together for a meeting so they can compare notes on how their groups are going. Start new study circles for people who are joining late. Collect the records from each circle (use the forms provided by SCRC) to give you a sense of the discussions and to help you document the process.

– STUDY CIRCLES END *(for now)* **–**

8 ***Hold the action forum.*** This is a chance to celebrate what your neighborhood has done, and to move from talk to action.

9 ***Keep the momentum going.*** Talk to the action groups to see how they're doing. Try to get local media to cover the action efforts. Work with people who want to get a new round of study circles going.

10 ***Pause and reflect on what you've learned, and start planning the next round.*** Get the working group together, and talk about how things went. Record (and applaud!) your achievements, and look for ways to make the program stronger. Check in with SCRC. Give feedback and encouragement to volunteers. Use what you learned to plan for the future. Try to expand your working group. In this way, you can sustain and deepen your study circle program and continue to build a stronger neighborhood!

A typical "round" of study circles

- The ***kickoff,*** a large meeting to get people involved in the study circles.
- Many study circles take place, each meeting several times.
- The ***action forum,*** a large meeting where study circle participants can report on their discussions, sign up for action groups, and celebrate the program.

Need help?
Call SCRC.

Session 1

Describing our neighborhood

Though we share a connection to the neighborhood, we rarely have the chance to express our hopes and concerns for the neighborhood. This session provides an opportunity to share personal experiences, stories, and opinions. It lays the foundation for the rest of the study circle, and sets the tone for open, thoughtful discussion.

★ Tips for facilitators:

- Welcome everyone, tell them about the program, and explain your role.
- Help the group set ground rules, and post them so everyone can see them. See the sample ground rules in the box.
- Introduce the recorder (or ask for a volunteer to record).
- Don't feel like you have to cover every question – or that you have to ask them in order.

Introductions

1. Introduce and describe yourself to the group. Tell the group a little about the neighborhood where you grew up.
2. How long have you lived in this neighborhood, and how did you come to live here? Was it by choice or by chance?
3. What skills and strengths do you bring to neighborhood issues?

Our connections to the neighborhood

1. How would you describe our neighborhood? What kinds of people live here?
2. How long has this neighborhood existed? What stands out about the history of the neighborhood?
3. In what ways do you feel connected to the neighborhood?
   - What neighborhood groups do you belong to? (For example: religious, volunteer, or youth groups.) Why are these connections important to you?
   - Describe an experience that made you feel connected to the neighborhood.
   - Describe an experience that made you feel like you didn't belong in the neighborhood.
4. What kinds of things would make you feel more connected to the neighborhood?
5. How has the neighborhood changed since you've lived here?
   - How has the mix of people changed?
   - How do people in your neighborhood get along? Is that changing?

Some sample ground rules

- Everyone gets a fair hearing.
- Share "air time."
- One person speaks at a time. Don't interrupt.
- Speak for yourself, not for others.
- If you are offended, say so.
- You can disagree, but don't personalize it. Stick to the issue. No name-calling or stereotyping.
- Everyone helps the facilitator keep the discussion moving and on track.

- What other kinds of changes do you see?
- How do these changes affect your life on a daily basis?

6. What do you like best about this neighborhood? Why? Tell a story or anecdote that illustrates what you like best.
7. If you could change one thing about our neighborhood, what would it be? Why?
8. Do you have children or relatives living in the neighborhood? How do their views of the neighborhood differ from your own?
9. What do people living outside the neighborhood think about it? What would you want them to know?

Building for the future

Sessions 2a-f will help us talk about the challenges facing the neighborhood, and different ways to improve the neighborhood. Before choosing which of the sessions to do, it is useful to take stock of the assets the neighborhood already has, and talk about our long-term vision for the neighborhood.

> **★ Tip for facilitators:**
> - Use a blackboard or newsprint to record the group's answers to the first question.

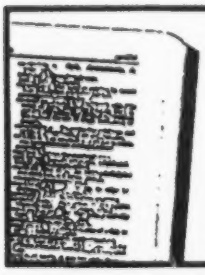
1. What assets does the neighborhood possess?
   - What strengths do people here take pride in?
   - What organizations are located in the neighborhood (schools, businesses, churches, clubs, agencies, associations, etc.)?
   - What do these groups contribute?
2. What do you want the neighborhood to be like in 10 years?
   - What would the quality of life be like?
   - What assets would the neighborhood possess?

Selecting issues

As you consider the following questions, take a look at Sessions 2a-f (pages 11-29).

> **★ Tip for facilitators:**
> - Give people a few minutes to look through Sessions 2a-f. Keep in mind that the group can do more than one of these sessions if it wants to.

1. Which one of the sessions in 2a-f would you like to use in our next meeting?
2. Are there other issues, not listed in Session 2a-f, that are important?



Glossary

Assets:

The assets of a neighborhood can be everything from buildings, to organizations, to the skills and talents of the residents. A park, a choir, dedicated teachers, and good restaurants are all examples of different assets a neighborhood might have.

Introduction to Sessions 2a-f:
Looking at specific neighborhood issues

Different neighborhoods have different strengths and face different challenges. As a group, choose the session(s) in 2a-f that best fit your neighborhood.

2a How can we build a stronger feeling of community?
Race, religion, age, and other kinds of differences

2b How can we make our neighborhood a better place for young people?

2c How can we make our neighborhood safer?
Working together to confront crime and violence

2d How can we build a more livable neighborhood?
Homes, housing, and beautification

2e How can we create good jobs for our neighborhood?

2f How can we work with schools to improve education – and the neighborhood?

★ Tips for facilitators:

Managing time in Sessions 2a-f.

Each of the sessions in 2a-f is divided into three segments:
1) "Starting the discussion" questions that help the group explore personal connections to the issue;
2) a range of views on the issue; and
3) final questions to help the group start thinking about action.

You might want to spend about 25% of your time on the "starting the discussion" questions, 50% on the views, and 25% on the final questions.

Using the views.

Sessions 2a-f all contain a range of views on the issue being discussed.

- Write the titles of the views on newsprint or a blackboard.
- Ask a few members of your group to volunteer to read each view out loud, or ask members to read each view to themselves.
- After reading the views, ask the group some of the "Questions to think about."

Summing up the session.

Allow some time at the end of the session for the recorder to give a summary of the discussion. Ask the group if they want to change or add to the summary.

Session 2a

How can we build a stronger feeling of community?

Race, religion, age, and other kinds of differences

In most neighborhoods, there are lots of different kinds of people. Even in neighborhoods where all the residents seem alike, there are many differences in lifestyles and viewpoints.

Race and ethnicity play a big role in many neighborhoods. But there can be other important differences, along the lines of age, religion, native language, income level, or sexual orientation. Many neighborhoods struggle to handle differences between newcomers and old-timers, renters and homeowners, gays and straights, or young people and senior citizens.

This session is designed to help you address the question of how to make your neighborhood a place where many different kinds of people feel a strong sense of community.

Starting the discussion

1. How well do you know your neighbors? When do you talk to your neighbors?
2. Has the mix of people living in the neighborhood changed in recent years?
3. Is there a strong feeling of community in the neighborhood? Tell a story that illustrates what you think.

How can we build a stronger sense of community? A range of views:

View 1 – We should give people a chance to talk about race and other differences.

We need to talk face-to-face about our differences. Prejudice on the basis of race, religion, or sexual orientation affects the way we behave toward one another, but we usually think this is too hard to talk about. We need to bring these feelings into the open in honest and respectful ways. We can start by bringing different kinds of people together at block parties and events that celebrate the diversity of the neighborhood. Discussions that help people work through race and other differences are even better. Once people begin to understand one another, they usually find out that they have a lot in common.

View 2 – We should honor the heritage of the neighborhood.

Every neighborhood has its own unique history. In some places, historic buildings and landmarks give the neighborhood its character. In others, people hold special events like parades or annual festivals. There are neighborhoods where the source of pride is a sports team, a restaurant, or the school marching band. The trouble is, newcomers don't always appreciate these things. For a strong neighborhood, we need to hold on to special traditions. We should teach young people and newcomers about the things that make our neighborhood special, so they'll feel that they're a part of it.

View 3 – We should empower people who have been excluded in the past.

You can't create a strong sense of community if some people feel that they're not being treated fairly. People need to feel that their voices are being heard – whether they are renters or homeowners, young people or senior citizens, Latinos or Asians or African-Americans or whites. We must make sure that the leadership of the neighborhood reflects the diversity of the people who live here. And we should make every effort to see that every group of people has a say in the important decisions.

View 4 – We should create projects where different kinds of people can work together toward common goals.

The best way to unify people is to get them working together on community projects. When they are working toward a common goal, people will begin to understand each other and try harder to get along. We need to find projects that appeal to all parts of the neighborhood – like building a playground, planting a community garden, or creating a new activity for young people. When we cooperate on things that concern all of us, we are doing the kind of work that builds a feeling of community.

View 5 – We should encourage people to take pride in their own cultures and identities.

It is natural and okay for us to spend most of our time with people in the neighborhood who are like us. People in the same racial, ethnic, or religious group enjoy the same things, and face the same problems, so it makes sense that we stick together. There is no need for African-Americans, Latinos, gays and lesbians, and people from different religious traditions to blend in with other cultures. Belonging to these smaller groups within the community gives people a sense of pride, solidarity, and strength. We should encourage people to focus on their own traditions and culture.

Questions to think about

- ▶ Which view comes closest to your own? Why?
- ▶ What are the strengths and weaknesses of the different ideas?
- ▶ What's missing? What other ideas would you suggest?

View 6 – We should insist on a basic level of respect and courtesy.

"Good fences make good neighbors." We should be polite and friendly to our neighbors. At the same time, we should respect one another's privacy. We should avoid doing things that offend our neighbors – like playing loud music, honking our car horns, or letting our dogs run unleashed. People should say hello when they meet, and look out for children in the neighborhood, without intruding in one another's private lives. This kind of respect is the glue which holds neighborhoods together. Our differences shouldn't matter as long as we can get along.

★ Tip for facilitators:

- Ask the recorder to give a summary of the discussion, and then ask the group if they want to change or add to the summary.

Final questions

1. What were the main themes in our discussion?
2. What are the most important challenges we are facing on these issues? What are our greatest strengths?
3. What two or three action ideas should people in our neighborhood work on? Why?

What can we do?

There are many ways in which residents can work together to build a stronger feeling of community. The following ideas could come from different views on the issue. What ideas would you add?

Individuals can: make an effort to get to know people who are different from them; invite new neighbors to dinner; try a new kind of food or find out more about a different culture; organize or attend a group that is helping people overcome prejudice; volunteer to help in a community garden or neighborhood cleanup project.

Groups of people can: hold festivals to celebrate local foods, crafts, and cultures; maintain historic landmarks or buildings; teach children the languages and stories of their ancestors; organize study circles on race; demand that councils, commissions, and other decision-making groups include people of color; get police to crack down on people who play loud music or let their dogs run unleashed.

Session 2b
How can we make our neighborhood a better place for young people?

Young people today face different challenges than their parents did. Families are under more stress. There are more single-parent households, and many where both parents work full-time. Many institutions that support families, such as churches, aren't as strong as they used to be. And our society sends confusing messages to our young people about how they should behave.

The good news is that people of all ages are finding new ways to make their neighborhoods safe and healthy for the young people who live there. Young people are talented and energetic, and want to be involved. This session is designed to help you decide how to make your neighborhood a better place for young people.

Starting the discussion

1. What is our neighborhood like for young people?

   • If you are an adult, how do your memories about being younger compare with how life is for young people today?

   • If you are a young person, what is good about growing up in the neighborhood? What's difficult about it?

2. How do people from different generations get to know one another or work together?

3. What kinds of things do young people do after school and on weekends?

Who are "we"?

In most sessions in this guide, every view begins with "we." In this session, we didn't want to imply that adults should be the only ones doing things for young people; young people are capable of helping themselves. So each of the views in this session begins with a goal or priority – it is up to young people and adults to decide which role they should play.

How can we make our neighborhood a better place for young people? A range of views:

View 1 – Young people should have more chances to build strong relationships with adults.

Young people need adults they can turn to for help or advice. We should help young people build strong relationships with adults who are good role models and who will urge them to do their best. Young people learn a lot from how adults act, as well as what adults say. We can help these relationships grow if we make sure that there are activities like mentoring and tutoring programs, church groups, Big Brother/Big Sister programs, school projects, and sports teams in the neighborhood. We should also find ways for retired people to share their experience and wisdom with young people.

View 2 – Young people need opportunities to learn good values and build their self-respect.

When young people belong to organizations that teach strong values – such as churches, mosques, synagogues, youth organizations, or summer camps – they learn to make good decisions about friends, social life, and dating. In addition, being involved in efforts to improve the neighborhood can help young people gain a sense of accomplishment and responsibility. We should always acknowledge young people when they do well. We must make sure that we give our young people ways to learn that it's who they are – not what they have – that matters.

View 3 – Young people should be protected from bad influences.

Everywhere they look, young people are exposed to sex, violence, and drugs. They are also influenced by other kids who are already in trouble. We should help young people deal with what they see and hear on television and from their peers. We should create drug-free zones around our schools. Young people who are always in trouble should be taken out of regular classrooms and put in schools where they can get more help. We must also work to remove bad influences like tobacco ads and X-rated stores, and get rid of places where young people hang out without supervision.

Questions to think about

- Which view comes closest to your own? Why?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the different ideas?
- What's missing? What other ideas would you suggest?

View 4 – Families deserve more support from the community.

Strong, responsible families will make our neighborhood stronger. That means parents need to take responsibility for their own children, and young people need to respect their parents. We should uphold the idea of strong families by working to reduce teen pregnancy and child abuse, and by going after "deadbeat dads." We can also support parents through parenting seminars and support groups, church programs, and child-care co-ops. For low-income families, support can also come in the form of food, shelter, health care, financial assistance, or other services.

View 5 – Young people deserve better opportunities to learn, grow, and stay out of trouble.

After-school, weekend, and summer activities can provide great experiences for young people. We can set up field trips, scout troops, sports teams, music and arts programs, block parties, volunteering opportunities, and mentoring programs. We also need to find ways to give young people paying jobs where they can learn valuable skills. In these ways, young people can experience new things, meet new people, find good role models, and see that there are many opportunities open to them in life.

View 6 – Juvenile crime should not be tolerated.

We need to make it clear that we won't allow young people to commit crimes. We need to reform juvenile justice practices and put stricter laws in place, so that young people who commit crimes will be held accountable for their actions. We can also do things that keep kids from getting into trouble in the first place. For example, we can establish curfews, and we can hold parents responsible for what their children do. We've got to send a message to everyone in the neighborhood that our safety is important, and that we expect our young people to abide by the law.

View 7 – Young people should have a voice in the affairs of the neighborhood.

Most of the decisions made in the neighborhood affect young people directly, but they are rarely asked to share their concerns, ideas, or solutions. Their knowledge, energy and intelligence shouldn't be ignored. Young people can help with neighborhood cleanup and beautification projects, and community gardens. We should also make sure that they are voting members of our neighborhood associations. We need to let them know that we value the contributions they can make to the entire community.

Final questions

1. What were the main themes in our discussion?
2. What are the most important challenges we are facing on these issues? What are our greatest strengths?
3. What two or three action ideas should people in our neighborhood work on? Why?
4. How will you make sure that young people are part of efforts to improve the neighborhood? How will you make sure their voices are heard?

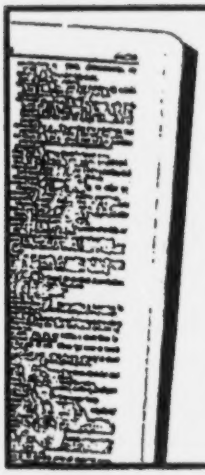
What can we do?

There are many ways in which residents can work to support the youth and families in their community. The following ideas could come from different views on the issue. What ideas would you add?

Adults can: spend time with the young people in their lives; help kids stay in school; be a Big Brother/Big Sister; tutor young people; keep an eye on kids who are in trouble; coach sports teams.

Young people can: set a good example for other youth; mentor younger children; get involved in neighborhood associations and other groups.

Groups of people can: create child-care co-ops; provide new activities for young people; keep X-rated stores from being built in the neighborhood; create programs to prevent teen pregnancy and child abuse; establish curfews for young people; give youth a greater voice in neighborhood decisions.



Glossary

Latchkey kids:

As more and more families rely on two incomes to support themselves, young people are often on their own between the time they leave school and the time their parents return from work. The term "latchkey kids" is often used to describe them.

Child-care co-op:

A cooperative, or co-op, is owned and operated by its members, who share both the benefits and the work. For example, in a child care co-op, one father might babysit the children of two other families one afternoon a week, and leave his children in their care two afternoons a week.

Session 2c
How can we make our neighborhood safer?
Working together to confront crime and violence

Safety is a big concern for almost every neighborhood. When you don't feel safe, it is hard to work on any other priorities.

Fortunately, many neighborhoods around the country have worked successfully to reduce crime and violence. The goal of this session is to help you talk about how to make our neighborhood a safer place to live and work.

Starting the discussion

1. Do you feel safe in the neighborhood? Why or why not?
2. What kinds of safety precautions do you usually take?
3. What roles do the police play in making the neighborhood safer?
4. What roles do residents, community groups, or organizations play in making the neighborhood safer?

How can we make our neighborhood safer? A range of views:

View 1 – Residents and police need to find better ways to work together.

We can do much more when residents and police try to work together, instead of blaming each other for problems in the neighborhood. There are many ways for citizens to help the police, including neighborhood watch groups and citizen patrols – even by videotaping drug or prostitution activity. Police officers can help citizens, especially young people, by getting to know them and by taking their concerns seriously. Reducing crime and violence requires both citizens and the police.

View 2 – We should deal with small offenses, before they lead to bigger problems.

When we put up with signs of disorder, like broken windows, graffiti, or abandoned cars, we send the message that we don't really care about our neighborhood. Residents can discourage crime by working together to keep up the appearance of the neighborhood. Local police can do their part by cracking down on minor offenses such as vandalism and public drunkenness. This will make it clear that crime and disorder will not be tolerated, at any level.

View 3 – We need to keep young people from getting into trouble.

Many young people get into trouble because they have too much free time. If we plan activities for them and show them that we care, our young people will be more likely to stay out of trouble. We need to give them chances to work with caring adults, to interact positively with one another, and to do their part in the community. They can help make the neighborhood safer by taking part in neighborhood cleanups, and joining in midnight basketball programs and community arts projects. We can also set up curfews and keep an eye on young people who've been in trouble.

View 4 – We need to stop police brutality and protect individual rights.

People need to feel that they can trust the police. Police officers should be involved in fighting crime, not committing crimes. It is important to make sure that all citizens, including young people, know their legal rights and responsibilities so that they can keep police officers from abusing their power. We also need to hold officers accountable for incidents of police brutality or corruption.

View 5 – We need to end child abuse, domestic violence, and elder abuse.

Some of the worst violence in our neighborhood takes place behind closed doors. What we once thought of as "personal problems" – like domestic violence and child abuse – can have long-lasting effects on the community as a whole. We need to support programs to prevent substance abuse and help victims of domestic violence. Police should respond quickly to domestic violence and child abuse cases, and take them seriously. Each of us can help by raising awareness of these issues, encouraging victims to report the crime, and sharing information about how to get help. We can also look in on elderly people in the neighborhood, to make sure they are being cared for.

View 6 – We need to deal with racial and ethnic tensions.

Much of the crime in our neighborhood is due to racial and ethnic divisions. Young people (and gangs in particular) often fight over these differences. We need to address ethnic tensions, and teach people – especially young people – ways to resolve conflict without violence. Police can help ease racial and ethnic tensions by making an effort to hire officers who reflect the racial, ethnic, and cultural mix of our community. They can also help by dealing with their own biases, and learning better ways to communicate with the people they serve.

Questions to think about

- Which view comes closest to your own? Why?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the different ideas?
- What's missing? What other ideas would you suggest?

View 7 – We need to deal with drugs and alcohol.

Many crimes are committed by people who are drunk or on drugs. We need to prevent substance abuse, punish people who sell alcohol to minors, and provide more "chem-free" activities for youth. We should crack down on the people who deal drugs. We should do everything we can to prevent people of all ages from abusing drugs and alcohol. We can raise awareness of the problem, teach young people about it, and urge adults to set a good example.

Final questions

1. What were the main themes in our discussion?
2. What are the most important challenges we are facing on these issues? What are our greatest strengths?
3. What two or three action ideas should people in our neighborhood work on? Why?

What can we do?

There are many ways in which residents can work to fight crime and violence. The following ideas could come from different views on the issue. What ideas would you add?

Individuals can: get to know their local police officers; keep a watchful eye on neighbors' homes; organize activities for young people; report cases of domestic violence or child abuse.

Groups of people can: create neighborhood watches and patrols; work with police officers to target trouble spots in the neighborhood; find ways to build stronger relationships between police officers and residents, especially young people; create substance abuse treatment and prevention programs.

Session 2d

How can we build a more livable neighborhood?

Homes, housing, and beautification

Beautiful neighborhoods are places where people take pride in where they live. What is "beautiful" about a neighborhood depends on the kind of neighborhood it is – each place has its own special look and character. But, when neighborhoods don't look the way their residents want them to, the quality of life goes down.

Good housing also plays a big part in our quality of life. People need homes that are safe, affordable, attractive, and suited to their needs. Often, improving the quality of housing and making the neighborhood more beautiful go hand in hand.

Not all neighborhoods have extra money to spend on improving their housing and overall appearance. But all neighborhoods have assets they can use – especially the energy of their citizens. Sometimes the most difficult part is getting organized, deciding how a neighborhood ought to look and how to reach that goal. This session gives you a chance to look at the options for your neighborhood.

Starting the discussion

1. What do you like best about the way the neighborhood looks? What are you most concerned about? Why?
2. How has the look of the neighborhood changed in recent years? Are these changes for the better or worse? Why?

How can we build a more livable neighborhood? A range of views:

View 1 – We should clean up the neighborhood.

Our neighborhood would look a lot better if it were cleaner and more orderly. In city neighborhoods, the main problems may be graffiti, broken windows, and abandoned properties. In other neighborhoods, litter, overgrown shrubbery, and broken sidewalks might be big concerns. No matter what our neighborhood is facing, we should organize regular cleanups involving neighborhood groups, youth groups, and other volunteers. We can also help prevent problems like littering and vandalism by making sure that the laws are enforced and by encouraging all our people – including our young people – to care for the neighborhood.

View 2 – We need to build or renovate more affordable housing.

Inexpensive housing is often ugly or run-down. It doesn't need to be this way; many neighborhoods have made big improvements by building new rental housing or fixing up older housing. This gives better housing choices to the people who need them most. Creating more housing also keeps rents across the neighborhood from going up. There are many ways to improve housing – seeking public funds, supporting nonprofit housing organizations, and working with private developers.

View 3 – We should have a say in decisions that affect our property values.

Our homes and quality of life are affected by what happens in the neighborhood around us. We should create land-use plans and ordinances to make sure that we have a say about new parking lots, streetlights, housing and business developments, dumps, and other changes. By working together and working with local government, we can also deal with smaller nuisances, such as abandoned cars, stray animals, and graffiti. If we let things slip, our neighborhood will go downhill.

View 4 – We need to increase home ownership.

When someone invests in a house, they have a bigger stake in the neighborhood as a whole. It makes sense to try to convince people who rent in our neighborhood to buy a house and "invest" in the neighborhood. It is even more important to make it affordable for families to own their own homes. We can do this by working with local banks, community development corporations, local government, and nonprofit organizations like Habitat for Humanity. The more homeowners there are, the better off we all are.

View 5 – We should preserve historic homes and buildings.

Many neighborhoods have historic homes, buildings, or landmarks that help give the area its unique character. We should work with developers, historic preservation organizations, and local government to save and restore our older buildings. We also need to make sure that new development is done in a way that fits in with what is already here. This means working with zoning boards, and in some cases, organizing to stop developers.

Questions to think about

- Which view comes closest to your own? Why?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the different ideas?
- What's missing? What other ideas would you suggest?

View 6 – We need to improve public housing.

Many public housing projects are ugly and poorly maintained, and some have problems with drugs and crime. These developments can drag down the rest of the neighborhood. Public housing should be a good option for individuals and families who need assistance. There are many examples of public housing residents, public officials, and neighborhood leaders working together to restore and maintain projects. These efforts have made public housing safer, better, and more attractive.

View 7 – We should hold landlords and residents accountable for their properties.

Both landlords and residents need to take responsibility for taking care of their homes. We should put pressure on absentee landlords who refuse to make repairs, or who abandon their property. We need to make sure that housing laws discourage this, that residents know their rights, and that the laws are enforced. There are also ways to encourage people to maintain and beautify their houses and apartments: presenting awards for outstanding renovation, decoration, or landscaping; organizing old house tours; providing free paint or gardening supplies; helping people get low-cost loans for maintenance and renovations.

View 8 – We need to involve people in planning and design.

It's important for neighborhood residents to take part in planning and designing new housing, buildings, and parks. After all, they are the ones who will be living with the results. When people are involved in planning, they care more about the success of the project, and are more interested in keeping everything looking nice. We need to work with elected officials, developers, and planning agencies to make sure that housing and other developments meet the neighborhood's needs.

What can we do?

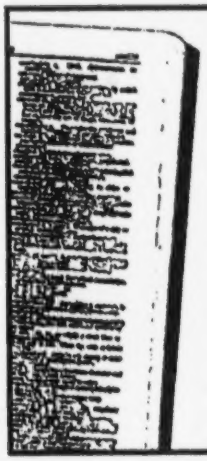
There are many ways in which community members can work to beautify the neighborhood and to improve housing opportunities. The following ideas could come from different views on the issue. What ideas would you add?

Individuals can: organize street cleanups; maintain their own homes; help neighbors do work on their property; notify the city about abandoned cars and housing code violations; attend zoning board meetings.

Groups of people can: work with government planners, local banks, non-profit organizations, and private developers to improve housing; work with local government to reclaim abandoned buildings; enlist the help of organizations like NeighborWorks and Habitat for Humanity to increase home ownership.

Final questions

1. What were the main themes in our discussion?
2. What are the most important challenges we are facing on these issues? What are our greatest strengths?
3. What two or three action ideas should people in our neighborhood work on? Why?



Glossary

Absentee landlord:
A property owner who does not live in that property.

Public housing:
Public housing means homes built with federal funds. They are administered either at the state or local level. They are available for those who qualify for federal or state assistance - people on welfare, as well as the elderly and disabled.

Zoning board:
An official government body that controls growth by "zoning" land for particular purposes. For example, neighborhoods can be "zoned" so that only certain types of buildings, such as single family homes, can be built there.

Session 2e
How can we create good jobs for our neighborhood?

Good job opportunities are essential for any neighborhood. Though changing the job situation may seem difficult, there are some inspiring examples of neighborhoods where people have worked together to build job skills and create new job opportunities.

Different neighborhoods have different needs when it comes to jobs. In some neighborhoods, people are working to help residents gain new skills. In other neighborhoods, the main goal is to bring businesses and job opportunities into the neighborhood itself. In still other places, people are working to connect residents with jobs outside the neighborhood.

The best way to start this session is by talking about your own work – the challenges you face, the successes you've enjoyed, the things you hope for. By building on the knowledge and skills you already have, you can figure out how to meet the needs of your neighborhood.

Starting the discussion

1. What do you do for work (either paid or unpaid)? How did you find your job? If you are looking for work, what kind of job are you looking for?
2. What has helped you along the way – your education? family background? social network? job experiences?
3. What kinds of jobs do people in the neighborhood have?
4. Where do people work? What are the advantages (and disadvantages) of having jobs located in the neighborhood? Outside the neighborhood?
5. Would you want to start your own business? What kind? What kinds of business opportunities do you see in the neighborhood?

How can we create good jobs for our neighborhood? A range of views:

View 1 – We should help people get job training, support, and experience.

People in our neighborhood need better chances to get training and experience. Many need help getting to work, or finding child care. To prepare people to go out and get jobs, we should provide job training programs, and more job-related classes for high school and college students. To help people learn on the job, we can create apprenticeship and internship programs. We also need employers to invest in training for their employees. Another way to help is by setting up child-care services, transportation to work, and more access to computers.

What can we do? Ideas for further discussion:

Short-term – Enroll in or help with programs which provide job training; help teach English as a Second Language or tutor people for the GED; organize carpools and other ways of helping people get to work; organize a child-care co-op; help people find internships or apprenticeships.

Long-term – create a scholarship program for high school students; create job training, internship, and apprenticeship programs; donate computers to schools and job training programs; hold workshops to help people with their resumés; set up a local jobs bank.

View 2 – We should help people get the money they need to start up or expand their businesses.

We should encourage people to be entrepreneurs – to have big dreams and try to make them real. Without money, people can't start up or expand their businesses. We need to make sure that banks obey the laws that require them to invest in local areas. Some communities now have revolving funds, lending circles, and other creative ways to get small loans to the people who need them most. To help people succeed, we can also help them learn basic business skills, get access to computers, learn how to market their ideas, and find out about services they can get from local government, universities, banks, and businesses.

What can we do? Ideas for further discussion:

Short-term – help small businesses find out how to get loans; talk to public officials and bank representatives about loans for neighborhood businesses; encourage student-run businesses and home-based businesses.

Long-term – write a grant proposal for economic development funds; create a Community Development Corporation (CDC); apply to make the neighborhood a Community Reinvestment Area (CRA); create lending circles and revolving funds.

Questions to think about

- Which view comes closest to your own? Why?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the different ideas?
- What's missing? What other ideas would you suggest?

View 3 – We should work with public officials to create the right conditions for attracting jobs.

Government assistance is available for neighborhoods, but if we don't speak up we won't get our share. And if our own government won't invest in us, no one else will. If our sidewalks, streets, and parks look bad, that sends a message to businesses that might locate here. We need to find out how to get funds for economic development, job training, schools, historic preservation, and zoning plans. Sometimes we may have to protest loudly to get public officials to listen to us. But in the long run, if we plan carefully, decide what we need, and make the most of the help we get, public officials will want to work with us.

What can we do? Ideas for further discussion:

Short-term – get people to call and ask our elected representatives for more help; invite public officials to neighborhood meetings, study circles, and social events; volunteer to serve on city boards.

Long-term – create a report explaining the neighborhood's major needs, and send it to City Hall; organize get-out-the-vote drives; stage a rally to call attention to what the neighborhood needs.

View 4 – We should recruit new businesses to come here, and help others to stay.

If we want jobs, we have to find and support the businesses that can provide those jobs. We also need to decide what kinds of jobs and businesses we want to attract – we may need to put pressure on employers to hire locally and provide quality jobs. Planning is important: neighborhood business plans, market surveys, and land use plans can help us attract and keep businesses. Shopping at local businesses may be the best way of showing our support for them. Making sure people know

what a great neighborhood we live in can also help convince them to do business here. In fact, any way of highlighting an area's unique character and "putting it on the map" helps attract investors.

What can we do? Ideas for further discussion:

Short-term – shop at local businesses; clean up potential business sites; form a committee to help local businesses get loans and services; develop a publicity plan for the area.

Long-term – establish a land use plan; target and recruit businesses to move in; get "empowerment zone" and other types of government funding.

View 5 – We should make the neighborhood a safer, more pleasant place to work in.

The best way to help create jobs is to make the neighborhood a safer and more enjoyable place to live and work. That means finding ways to reduce crime, organizing events to boost community pride and cooperation, and providing activities for our young people. It can also mean making the neighborhood look better by organizing neighborhood cleanups, fixing up historic buildings, and maintaining parks, sidewalks, and streets. If the neighborhood is a place people want to be, it will attract businesses and jobs.

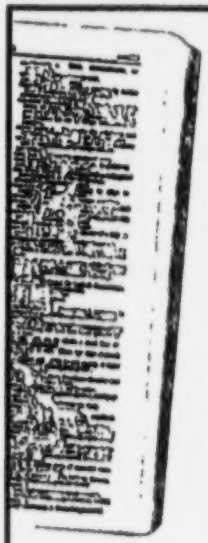
What can we do? Ideas for further discussion:

Short-term – organize neighborhood watch groups; work with the police department; organize neighborhood cleanups; plant trees; provide activities for young people.

Long-term – work with public officials on fixing up streets and sidewalks; establish an historic district; organize neighborhood festivals and other events.

Final questions

1. What were the main themes in our discussion?
2. What are the most important challenges we are facing on these issues? What are our greatest strengths?
3. What two or three action ideas should people in our neighborhood work on? Why?



Glossary

Apprenticeships and Internships:
These are short-term jobs – for little or no pay – which allow people to get more experience in the field. Apprentices are often expected to continue working for the business, at a better job, after the apprenticeship is over.

Community Development Corporation (CDC):
CDCs are local organizations that do things like build new housing or provide job training. They are controlled by the people and organizations in the community.

Community Reinvestment Area (CRA):
Local governments create CRAs so they can give tax breaks to people opening new businesses in a particular area.

Empowerment Zones/
Enterprise Communities:
The federal government singles out some communities for special tax breaks, zoning regulations, building codes, and wage laws that help the area attract businesses. For more information, contact the USDA EZ/EC Team at 1-800-645-4712.

Entrepreneur:
A person who takes the initiative to build, manage, and grow his or her own business.

Job bank:
A listing of job openings. A job bank can connect businesses with potential employees, particularly those with special skills. Job banks can be found on the Internet, and in community centers, social service agencies, and employment organizations.

Lending circle:
A lending circle is a group of people who share their assets as collateral for a loan (collateral is something you promise to give a bank – such as a house or car – if you can't repay a loan). The circle decides which member of the group should receive the first loan, and the next loan can't be made until the first loan is being paid off.

Revolving funds:
Revolving funds are often established by local governments or development corporations. The fund gives low-interest loans to local businesses. Once a business begins to make a profit, their payments on the loan are combined to be given as loans to other businesses.

Session 2f
How can we work with schools to improve education – and the neighborhood?

A school is one of the most important places in any neighborhood. Some schools are centers for the social life of the community, places where people gather for concerts, plays, sporting events, and meetings. All schools are centers for the learning and development of young people, so they have a great influence on the future of the neighborhood.

In many neighborhoods, people have found ways of getting more involved with their schools. By helping to improve the quality of education, citizens can help young people and make an investment in the future. In turn, schools can give more to the neighborhoods that surround them. This session is intended to help you decide how your neighborhood and the schools in it might work together toward these shared goals.

Starting the discussion

1. Do you have children in school? Are you in school now yourself?
2. What have your experiences been like with the schools in the neighborhood?
3. How have the schools in the neighborhood changed during the time you've lived here?
4. What kind of impact do you think the schools have on the neighborhood?

How can we work with schools to improve education – and the neighborhood? A range of views:

View 1 – We should make sure that schools are safe places to learn.

Students and teachers need to feel safe in order for learning to take place. School should be a place where young people can concentrate; there should be order, discipline, and even peace and quiet. To reduce crime and violence in and around our schools, we may need to work more closely with the police, provide social services to young people who need them, recruit volunteers to monitor the halls and routes to school, or teach conflict resolution to young people. To create order in the schools, we may need to get parents and schools to cooperate better, bring more adults into school to serve as role models, or adopt stricter standards for student behavior. We should also ask young people themselves to help us find ways to make schools safer.

View 2 – We should give parents and other citizens a bigger role in making school decisions.

People often feel that they have no say in how schools work. Schools should ask more citizens to take part in deciding how we can all help young people. This would help schools serve the community better. And it would give neighborhood residents a much greater appreciation for the people who work in the schools and for the quality of education they are providing. There are many ways to get residents involved in decision-making: school councils that include citizens; new advisory groups on particular issues; or school meetings that give a bigger role to parents.

Questions to think about

- Which view comes closest to your own? Why?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the different ideas?
- What's missing? What other ideas would you suggest?

View 3 – We should get parents and other citizens more involved in supporting the school.

Getting community members involved in educating young people can be rewarding for everyone. In fact, we can't expect schools to do a good job if they don't get this kind of support. Volunteers can help out in schools, in after-school activities, and in summer programs for youth. There are many possibilities: volunteers can mentor kids, coach sports teams, restock school libraries, take part in career days, and raise money for school projects. We should bring the assets of the neighborhood – including cultural groups, libraries, businesses, and the skills and talents of individual residents – into the lives of young people.

View 4 – We should make the school a community center.

It is a shame when school buildings are open only during school hours. Many schools open up for evening and weekend events – concerts, neighborhood meetings, plays, adult education classes, recreation, tutoring services, and banquets. And some schools house programs that provide social services for young people, job training and counseling, child care, and health services. Making the school a center for neighborhood activities can make the ties stronger between educators, parents, and other residents.

View 5 – We should work to highlight diversity and reduce prejudice in our schools.

The cultures in our neighborhood offer a wonderful opportunity to learn about different music, dance, foods, languages, dress, traditions, learning, and ways of thinking. We should look at this diversity as a way to enrich our young people's education – in school, and in after-school activities. We also need to make sure people aren't treated unfairly because they are "different." Discrimination can take many forms, from incidents among students, to unfair treatment by teachers, to advanced classes filled with white students only. We should teach young people and teachers to treat all people respectfully, no matter what their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, or religion.

View 6 – We should give more emphasis to helping children aged 0 to 6.

The first several years of a child's life are the most important learning years. If young children are healthy, if we take good care of them and give them good opportunities to learn, they are much more likely to succeed in school and in life. It is now possible to detect many learning problems in their early stages, when children are young. This means we can deal with them in time to give children a strong start in school. Schools and neighborhoods can help young children in many ways: community preschools, child-care networks, health clinics for children and mothers, and classes and support groups for parents.

Final questions

1. What were the main themes in our discussion?
2. What are the most important challenges we are facing on these issues? What are our greatest strengths?
3. What two or three action ideas should people in our neighborhood work on? Why?

What can we do?

There are many ways in which residents can work with local schools. The following ideas could come from different views on the issue. What ideas would you add?

Individuals can: tutor students; take part in a career day; coach a sports team; run for the school board; keep track of how schools are meeting their standards; read to children; attend school meetings; organize field trips.

Groups of people can: restock the school library; raise money for schools; create partnerships between businesses and schools; create internship programs; organize patrols of school hallways and school grounds; run substance abuse prevention programs; present awards to outstanding teachers; work with educators to create school councils or advisory boards.

Session 3
How can we build a stronger, more effective neighborhood?

Solving problems, planning for the future, and building community

More and more, neighborhoods are showing that they can tackle key issues like crime and jobs. Many are trying to make better use of neighborhood and city assets. Others are working to make sure that the people who live and work in the neighborhood have a voice in the decisions that affect them.

How can people in our neighborhood get better at working together? How can we strengthen our neighborhood so that solving problems and improving the neighborhood gets easier? This session provides a chance for us to talk about how we can make our neighborhood run better.

> ★ **Tip for facilitators:**
>
> - These cases are intended to help start the discussion. You'll probably want to spend the same amount of time on them as you spent on the starting questions in the previous sessions.

Cases for discussion

1. Area service providers have programs available to neighborhood residents, but many people do not know how to take advantage of them or how to help out.
2. People who live and work in the neighborhood see an increase in traffic, and want to do something to manage the traffic and promote safety.
3. Only a small number of people – usually the same faces – attend the monthly neighborhood meetings.
4. A local election is coming up that will have a big impact on the neighborhood. Many people don't seem interested.
5. The City decides to build a parking lot on a plot of land in the neighborhood. Residents disagree with the decision.
6. Congregations and volunteer organizations in the neighborhood have common concerns and shared goals, but rarely work together.

> **Questions about the cases**
>
> ▶ What are the important issues in each case? Why?
>
> ▶ Which of these seem like situations our neighborhood might face?
>
> ▶ How would our neighborhood deal with each situation?

How can we build a stronger, more effective neighborhood? A range of views:

View 1 – We need to give people a greater voice in making decisions.

When people have a say in the decisions that affect their neighborhood, they get more involved. Neighborhood associations and other groups should play a bigger role in deciding how policies are created and how money is spent by the city. At the neighborhood level, we need to involve more people (and all kinds of people) in talking about issues, solving problems, and making decisions. Sharing power and authority will pay off for the neighborhood and the city.

What can we do? Ideas for further discussion: organize neighborhood assemblies and study circles to provide input on big decisions; work more closely with government service providers, businesses, schools, and other institutions; publish a neighborhood newsletter which covers the decision-making process at the city and neighborhood levels.

View 2 – We should strengthen neighborhood leadership and unity.

To be successful, our neighborhood needs strong leaders who have a good sense of what is important to residents. In their work with City Hall and other organizations, our leaders need to be able to send a clear message about what we want. We should make sure our leaders and organizers get leadership training. We should also use surveys, focus groups, and open meetings to let our leaders know what people think. This will help make the political system work for us.

Questions to think about

- ▶ Which view would you choose? Why?
- ▶ What are the strengths and weaknesses of the different views?
- ▶ What other ideas would you suggest?
- ▶ What would it take to put these views into action?

What can we do? Ideas for further discussion: provide leadership training for people who head up neighborhood associations and other groups; hold well-publicized elections for those leadership positions; conduct neighborhood surveys; send periodic reports to local government and newspapers, giving survey results and quotes from individuals; encourage people to contact their representatives.

View 3 – We should help residents and organizations work together to solve problems.

When citizens have basic concerns about crime, trash pickup, or other issues, they often don't know how to get help. And the organizations that are responsible for working on these problems often don't know how to get help from citizens. Police departments, social service providers, soup kitchens, zoning boards, local charities, schools, and housing agencies often don't have strong connections to neighborhood residents. We need to help people figure out where they should call, how to give their input, and how to volunteer their time and services. We can also help the organizations let citizens know about the services they offer.

What can we do? Ideas for further discussion: create government directories for citizens; help outreach efforts by nonprofits and government agencies; establish citizen advisory groups for those organizations; let people know where volunteer help is needed; conduct neighborhood surveys; organize study circles on various issues; create resource banks to connect people and organizations.

View 4 – We should get people involved in long-term planning.

To create real change in a neighborhood, you need to plan ahead. Governments and other local institutions are constantly making plans that affect citizens, but the citizens aren't usually involved in the planning. Many neighborhoods and communities have used "visioning" and strategic planning processes, which get all kinds of people involved in setting long-range goals and priorities. This kind of planning allows time for people to find the resources they need to make change.

What can we do? Ideas for further discussion: start visioning and strategic planning processes; find ways to connect neighborhood planning with planning by businesses, schools, and other local institutions; hold "charrettes" and other events which help people plan buildings and neighborhoods.

View 5 – We should focus on building bridges between different groups of people.

There are divisions in our neighborhood that keep us from communicating and cooperating. When a crisis arises, people fight instead of working together. We are often divided along lines of race, class, or religion. We need to recognize the divisions in our neighborhood and work to create understanding between people on different sides. That way, when conflicts and emergencies arise, people will come together in an atmosphere of respect and cooperation.

What can we do? Ideas for further discussion: create projects which get different kinds of people working together; organize study circles on race relations and diversity; hold social events to bring people together; provide dispute resolution training.

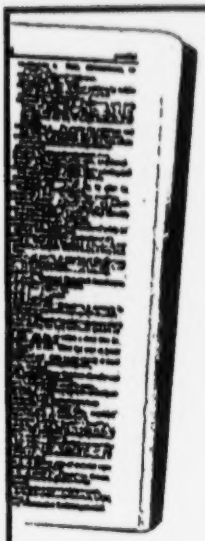
View 6 – We need to form "street associations" and other small groups.

A lot of people would rather get together with the neighbors on their block than attend a monthly neighborhood meeting. Many neighborhoods organize block clubs or street associations to get people to meet one other, socialize, talk about common problems, and figure out solutions. When neighbors get to know each other, they are much likely to do those basic but critical things like looking after each other's homes and children. Starting at the block level makes it easier to get people involved in larger neighborhood decisions.

What can we do? Ideas for further discussion: form street or block associations; publish a neighborhood newsletter covering the activities of the smaller groups; create "phone trees" for people who live on the same block.

Final questions

1. What were the main themes in our discussion?
2. What are the most important challenges we are facing on these issues? What are our greatest strengths?
3. What two or three action ideas should people in our neighborhood work on? Why?



Glossary

Charrette:

A workshop that is used by architects and city planners to get detailed, informed input from people on planning and building decisions.

Focus group:

A research method where a carefully selected small group of people is brought together and a researcher asks them some questions. The main goal is to gather information.

Resource bank:

A place where residents can go to get information about public services, local organizations, and other resources available in the community. Resource banks can help people find jobs, transportation, and child care.

Street association:

A group of residents, usually living on the same block or street, who come together to socialize and talk about neighborhood concerns and issues.

Visioning:

A process which brings together people from across the community to create a vision for the future, define short- and long-term goals, and, in some cases, establish plans for action.

Session 4
Making a difference:
How can we move from words to action?

By participating in this study circle, you have already made a contribution to your neighborhood. When people share their hopes and concerns with their neighbors, and begin to understand each other better, they strengthen the neighborhood.

But this project is also intended to help you make a difference in other ways. At the conclusion of the discussions, study circle participants from all over your neighborhood will meet to share their ideas and celebrate the neighborhood. Most study circle organizers call this an action forum. During the forum, they ask participants to sign up for action groups to work on some of the ideas that came out of the study circles. The records from each study circle can be gathered into a report that sums up what people said in the discussions. The report can then used by public officials, neighborhood leaders, and neighborhood residents.

This session is designed to help you sum up your ideas for the action forum and the report, as well as think further about your own action plans. It includes a list of promising action ideas and examples from other neighborhoods.

Brainstorming about ways to make a difference

Take some time to brainstorm about action possibilities. Use your records from previous sessions to help you remember ideas you already came up with, and use the list on pages 36-39 to add more. The ideas on these pages are merely examples that show some of the different ways of approaching these issues.

Use your imagination! Make a list that everyone can see – on newsprint or a chalkboard. It will help if you use four categories:

- Individual actions
- Projects small groups of people could create
- Activities that businesses, churches, clubs, schools, and other groups could undertake
- Neighborhood-wide actions – including individuals, organizations, and public officials working together

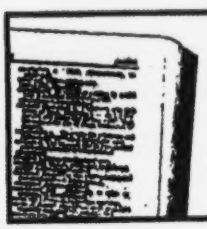
Setting priorities for the REPORT and for the ACTION FORUM

For the report and the action forum, it will be especially useful to know what your top action priorities are. This will help the organizers create the action groups at the action forum, and help them know what to emphasize in the report. Look over the list you just created.

1. In each of the four categories (individual, small-group, organizational, neighborhood-wide), what two or three ideas seem most practical and useful?
2. Are any of these ideas already being tried in the neighborhood? How could we support those efforts?
3. Pick one or two ideas from the list, and spend some time on those in particular:
   a. What would it take to turn this idea into reality?
   b. What neighborhood assets could we use to help move this idea forward?
   c. What kinds of support or help do we need in order to take these steps?
   d. What would our next steps be? What other groups might we link up with?

Final questions

1. What have you learned in this study circle that has surprised you?
2. Has this study circle affected the way you think about these issues? If so, how?
3. Will this study circle affect your involvement in the neighborhood? If so, how?
4. How will you continue to make a difference on these issues in the neighborhood?



Glossary

Brainstorming:
A process where a group of people makes a list of ideas. The point is just to throw out the ideas, and discuss them or rank them later.

List of action ideas

No matter what your opinions are about neighborhood issues, you can probably find a few – or many – action ideas that you could support. The ideas in this list should represent a range of views and opinions. Some of the examples are the accomplishments of study circle participants in other communities.

What can we do as individuals?

These ideas seem so simple we often take them for granted:

▶ **Welcome new neighbors.**

▶ **Attend meetings of the school board, zoning board, city council, or other groups which make important decisions.** Do your homework, give your ideas, and get others to attend with you.

▶ **Take leadership.** You don't have to be a public official or a well-known person to be a leader.

▶ **Get together with other parents in your child's classroom and talk about your concerns and ideas.** Attend teacher conferences and parent nights, and try to keep in regular contact with teachers and the school.

▶ **Support local businesses.**

▶ **Volunteer at neighborhood schools, community centers, and other local organizations like food banks and shelters.**

▶ **Many communities offer parenting seminars, English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, and refresher classes in math and English so that parents can understand what their kids are learning.** Participate in the classes you think will help you.

▶ **Build relationships, especially with people from different racial, ethnic, and religious groups.**
Example: In one study circle in Delaware, participants formed a summertime buddy system to continue their one-on-one effort to learn more about people of different races. They did things like having lunch together, or going shopping or to a movie.

▶ **Be a mentor to young people.** Get to know the children in your neighborhood – get involved in tutoring, be a Big Brother/Big Sister, coach a sports team, take part in drama or arts activities, or simply make an effort to say hello.
Example: In Cambridge, Maryland, after participating in a study circle, a handful of the participants volunteered to work in a tutoring program for young people.

▶ **Organize a block party in your neighborhood.**

▶ **Think about skills and talents that you can share with the community.** Could you coach a little league team? Help other residents to learn English? Work on a community cleanup?

▶ **Read to and talk with the children in your life.** After they can read by themselves, keep reading together, and talking with them about what they're reading and what they think.

▶ **Be informed on local issues.** Read and contribute to the local newspaper.

▶ **Learn about your neighborhood's history.** Learn from past efforts to organize and improve the neighborhood.

▶ **Get to know your local police officers.**
Example: Go on a "Ride-Along" – ask to accompany an officer during one of his/her shifts. One of the best ways to understand the challenge of police work is to experience it.

What can we do as a neighborhood?

If you want to solve a problem or create a project, look around you – there are many people in your neighborhood, your workplace, your school, or this study circle who might want to help you. Use the organizations you belong to, such as businesses, clubs, neighborhood associations, and congregations, to recruit more people and give more weight to your efforts.

▶ **Form a team that maps neighborhood assets and helps people find out about services available to them.**
Example: In Bridgeport, Connecticut, study circle organizers created a simple directory listing area services and programs to connect new volunteers with community service projects.

▶ **Help bring congregations from different faiths together to hold joint services, or to form a unity choir.**
Example: Through study circles, black and white ministers in Cambridge, Maryland; Utica, New York; Springfield, Massachusetts; Lexington, Kentucky; and Lima, Ohio, have used a variety of strategies to bring church communities together. They've paired congregations for study circles, arranged pulpit exchanges, and held joint services.

▶ **Help create new business opportunities, especially for young people.**
Example: In South Central Los Angeles, California, high school students transformed an abandoned lot into a community garden. The project, called "Food from the 'Hood," grew into a business opportunity for the students when local manufacturers teamed up to help them market a salad dressing the students created. The profits were put toward college scholarships for "Food From the 'Hood" members.

▶ **Organize an arts project – such as a photo exhibit, mural, cultural festival, musical event, or theater production.**
Example: In Boston, Massachusetts, a neighborhood association sponsored the "Unity Through Diversity Mural," which was designed and painted by young people, and is now a prominent landmark.

▶ **Get people working together on projects to help the less fortunate.**
Example: After their study circles, people in Lima, Ohio, got together to help the Daily Bread Soup Kitchen expand its operation and add tutoring and recreation activities.

▶ **Create a community center for the neighborhood.**
Example: In Cabot, Vermont, a high school has partnered with local businesses to build a state-of-the-art science lab that is used for both commercial and educational purposes. The school also holds adult education classes in the evening and has recently added a community heath clinic. Parent volunteers help run the after-school activities, and local voters have approved a bond issue to fix up the school.

▶ **Expand community input on school district issues.**
Example: The Minneapolis Public Schools used study circles to involve parents and other community members in deciding whether to adopt school choice, maintain the current system, or create a couple of magnet schools and leave the rest of the system the same. Forty study circles met for several sessions, and influenced new performance standards and planning initiatives for the school district.

▶ **Create a neighborhood newsletter, or get involved with the local newspaper.**
Example: The residents of the Chatham Court Apartments in Washington, DC, have formed a tenants' association to make sure that their concerns and interests are represented in the operation of the apartment complex – and in the surrounding neighborhood. They publish a regular newsletter to keep tenants informed about community events and neighborhood issues.

▶ **Make study circles an ongoing part of the community.**
Example: In Miami, Florida, following a first round of study circles, residents have continued to work together to expand the dialogue. Participants have spurred discussions in public high schools, adult community education centers, and with a variety of elected officials from school board members to Congressional representatives.

▶ **Find ways to bring young people and adults together.**
Example: In Kansas City, Missouri, some neighborhoods have established "block leaders" that act as neighborhood moms and dads to young people who are "latchkey kids." Block leaders provide everything from a safe place to get afternoon snacks, to cooking classes, to wake-up calls. Some of the projects they have planned include: painting over graffiti, planting community gardens, and buying groceries for senior citizens who are unable to leave their homes.

▶ **Create opportunities for young people to take leadership.**
Example: In New Haven, Connecticut, a Board of Young Adult Police Commissioners was created to give young people a voice in safety measures adopted by the New Haven police department. The Board successfully argued against installing metal detectors in local high schools and instead established a peer mediation program to help students solve their own problems before they lead into violence. The Board has also lobbied successfully to expand treatment services for adolescent alcohol and drug abusers and raised $2,000 for a hospice for youth with AIDS.

▶ **Organize events which celebrate diversity.**
Example: In Hampton, Virginia, one study circle is planning a "Diversity Day" for young people. A diversity forum for the community is also in the works, with plans to involve national and local speakers as panelists.

▶ **Find ways to improve child care in the neighborhood.**
Example: In Raleigh, North Carolina, residents partnered with the local chapter of Habitat for Humanity to rebuild a run-down child-care center. The Rising Star Child Care Center has created many new jobs. The Center also works to make sure that tuition fees are low, so that low-income families can afford quality care for their children.

▶ **Create a neighborhood block watch or citizen patrol.**
Example: In Delray, Florida, citizen volunteers have been trained and equipped by the police department to run citizen-observer patrols. The patrols use donated cell phones and radios to report suspicious behavior. In every Delray neighborhood where there is a citizen patrol, there has been a 75% drop in crime.

▶ **Work with police to meet the needs of your neighborhood.**
Example: Through the Safe Streets Program in Indianapolis, Indiana, residents worked with local police to identify the most unsafe streets in their neighborhoods. At the residents' request, the police took aggressive action against even minor offenses in these areas.

▶ **Address race issues in the schools.**
Example: One study circle in Sioux City, Iowa, was concerned about whether the public school curriculum accurately reflects the diversity of the community. By working with the school's Curriculum Director, the group was able to change the course offerings.

▶ **Create opportunities for parents and students to work together in school.**
Example: Public School 146 in East Harlem hosts Family Math Night, where parents and students learn math together and parents learn how to help with homework.

▶ **Work on projects that connect schools with the community.**
Example: School District Four in New York City has a lively after-school program that includes a seven-week summer camp for children and adults, and a variety of tutoring and recreation activities for people of all ages.

▶ **Organize community cleanup projects.**
Example: In San Diego, California, residents of Barrio Logan identified 23 walls that were always covered with graffiti, and planted ivy over them. Planting ivy eliminates the need to paint over graffiti again and again.

▶ **Encourage neighbors and landlords to maintain their property.**
Example: In Minneapolis, Minnesota, residents of the Willard-Hay neighborhood were trained by the city's Department of Housing to patrol their streets as part of the Citizen Inspector Program. Neighbors who were not maintaining their property received a letter from fellow residents, rather than the city, asking them to fix the problem. The citizen patrols have been 70% effective and have freed up the city's time for larger cleanup efforts.

▶ **Work to revitalize a public housing project.**
Example: Residents of the Kenilworth-Parkside public housing project in Washington, DC, formed a neighborhood association in 1980 to fight crime, drugs, and welfare dependence. They took over management of the project, waged a successful campaign to get more of their children to go to college, and nurtured a number of new, tenant-owned businesses. Over the past 15 years the effort has created 102 new jobs, enabled 132 residents to get off welfare, and helped 700 young people to go to college.

▶ **Find ways to support local entrepreneurs.**
Example: In Taos, New Mexico, residents worked with local government to transform an abandoned supermarket building into an "incubator" business park, which provides space and subsidies for start-up businesses. More than 28 businesses and 200 jobs have been created, and residents are now preparing to add a day care and advertising cooperative.

▶ **Create services that provide job training and placement.**
Example: In Albuquerque, New Mexico, a community-based collaborative called Southwest Creations was formed to provide job training and employment for low-income women. Southwest Creations trains women in the management and operation of clothing production, and sells its products through a mail-order catalog. The project employs 25 people, with wages ranging from $6.25 to $14.00 per hour.

▶ **Form a Community Development Corporation (CDC).**
Example: In the South Bronx, New York, a neighborhood association created the MBD Housing Development Corporation. Since 1980, MBD has sponsored, built, or renovated over 2,300 new housing units for low- and middle-income families. MBD has also been instrumental in developing a ten-acre retail site and creating two large parks.

▶ **Work with public officials to involve more people in public decisions.**
Example: In Fremont, California, local officials took steps to increase public input to the city's five-year Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) through a program called " I Have An Idea." Residents of Fremont were invited to participate in the CIP planning process through mail surveys and newspaper articles. In all, the new approach resulted in 42 new projects.

The facilitator's role

- ***Stay neutral.*** Use the power you have with the group wisely. Your role should never be to promote a particular point of view, but rather to further the discussion. By the end of the discussion, group members should not know your views on the issues being discussed.
- ***Be prepared.*** Read the guide and think ahead of time about how the discussion might go. This will allow you to give your full attention to the group.
- ***Let participants respond to one another.*** Encourage interaction among the group. If questions or comments are directed at you, try to deflect them to someone else. You should speak less than any other person in the group.
- ***Don't let any one person dominate.*** If you allow people to interrupt or let one or two talkers take over, the more polite people will get angry and frustrated. At the first sign of trouble, refer to the ground rules the group has set.
- ***Draw out quiet participants.*** Don't put anyone on the spot, but watch for opportunities to bring quiet people into the discussion. Learn participants' names and use them.
- ***Keep the discussions on track.*** Since important issues are usually related to each other, it is easy for groups to move into other areas. Participants need the freedom to explore connections and ideas, but try to keep the discussion related to the session's topic.
- ***Allow for pauses and silences.*** People need time to think and reflect. Sometimes silence will help people build up the courage to make a valuable point. You may find it helpful to count silently to ten after asking a question.
- ***Don't worry about achieving consensus.*** Not everyone is going to agree on everything. There is no need for consensus – just try to help the group find some areas of agreement.
- ***When in doubt, ask the group.*** If you're having trouble enforcing the ground rules, or deciding what topic to spend time on, ask the group what they would like to do.

The recorder's role

Each study circle needs a volunteer ***recorder*** – who is not the facilitator – to jot down some of the key ideas. This person's main job is to listen carefully and document what the group members talk about. Some people feel that they can take good notes and still participate in the discussion. Others prefer to concentrate on listening. (Use the recording forms and guidelines provided by SCRC.)

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